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ABSTRACT

In the past, employer-provided, job-specific training for new employees and continuing education for those who wished to advance in their jobs were often sufficient to keep abreast of technological changes. This is no longer the case, however. The substantial monetary and time expenditures associated with retraining programs that are begun only after workers' skills have become obsolete underscore the necessity of developing ongoing retraining programs geared toward persons who are currently employed. Business, labor unions, and government can all play a role in funding and/or providing retraining. Funders can make their influence felt by selecting the training provider and shaping the content of training. It is also possible to combine federal, state, and local government funding with union or business funds, as has been done in such states as Michigan, Delaware, and Alabama. The following all have a place in comprehensive retraining programs intended to prevent skill obsolescence: a counseling/educational guidance component; an assessment system; a support system (to provide such things as financial aid, child care, workplace study areas, and recognition of trainees' achievements); basic, vocational, and general skills programs; and management development programs. (MN)

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ERIC DIGEST No. 72

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

PREVENTING OBSOLESCENCE THROUGH ADULT RETRAINING

Rapid technological changes, dramatic shifts in labor force distribution, and the increasing pressures of foreign competition have made the dangers of skill obsolescence and eventual job loss a reality for many American workers. Moreover, there is every likelihood that the need for retraining will continue to increase. Economic security is coming to depend less on expertise and more on flexibility (Perelman 1984). This ***ERIC Digest*** examines why past responses to skill obsolescence are no longer sufficient, describes the elements that should be included in a comprehensive program to prevent skill obsolescence, and proposes appropriate roles of business, labor, and government in retraining.

Why Are Retraining Programs Needed?

In the past, employer-provided, job-specific training for new employees and continuing education for those who wished to advance in their jobs were often sufficient to keep abreast of technological changes. When automation resulted in massive labor market shifts, the solution to worker dislocation was often relocation. However, large-scale layoffs and plant closings in the last two decades have focused attention on reeducation and retraining. The rapid pace of technological advancement, the shrinking supply of entry-level workers, and the increasing complexity and abstractness of many jobs coupled with lower levels of general education among labor market entrants made it imperative that more attention be paid to the issue of preventing skill obsolescence among American workers.

After analyzing many successful and unsuccessful retraining and worker relocation programs, Gordus, Gohrband, and Meiland (1987) drew a distinction between "reactive" responses to changing job skill requirements (i.e., retraining programs that are begun only after massive permanent layoffs and plant closings have occurred) and "active" retraining programs that anticipate future skill deficits and provide training to upgrade workers' skills before jobs are lost and plants are forced to close.

Benefits of an Active Approach to Retraining

Gordus et al. (1987) demonstrated that even exemplary programs begun only after workers' skills have become obsolete and their jobs have been lost are expensive ($800 to $3,500 per participant for vocational skills training) and their outcomes vary widely (the placement rates from six demonstration sites of a model economic readjustment assistance program ranged from 9 to 81 percent) (p. 13). Time is another crucial factor. Effective retraining programs—whether remedial or intended to teach workers new skills—take time to plan and implement. Program providers who must initiate retraining programs after workers have been dislocated do not have time to engage in long-term planning, and unemployed persons are often unwilling to participate in lengthy retraining programs. Because they do not have such time constraints, ongoing retraining programs geared toward persons who are currently employed can be more carefully planned and presented.

By anticipating what skills their workers will need in the future, employers can prepare their present employees to respond to changing demands imposed by technological advances and thereby avoid the disruption in operations and added expenses related to recruiting, hiring, and training new employees. Workplace retraining programs also benefit employees by increasing their basic skills, enhancing their employability, improving their job performance, and providing them with the skills needed to perform new jobs and adapt to new technologies (Gordus, Gohrband, and Meiland 1987).

Who Should Provide the Retraining?

Business, labor unions, and government can all play a role in funding and/or providing retraining. Funders can make their influence felt by selecting the training provider and shaping the content of training. Of course, funders retain the most control over a program when they provide the training themselves rather than paying an independent institution to provide educational services. Employers who provide their own training can increase the incentive for employees to participate in retraining by making the instruction relevant to employees' work experiences. According to Gordus et al. (1987), the most successful programs, in terms of postprogram wage raises, are those operated by employers and unions. Federal, state, and local government funding can be combined with union or business funds to varying extents.

The National Alliance of Business (1987) described the following examples of ways in which public funds can be used in privately run retraining programs to prevent skill obsolescence among persons who are currently employed.

- Funds provided by the state of Michigan's Upgrade Program are used to train Frost, Inc. employees in the use of flexible manufacturing systems. As an added incentive, employees are given the opportunity to purchase home computers at half price.
- The National Technological University's degree program offers management seminars accredited by the North Central Association of Universities and several Master of Science degrees via satellite-transmitted training through a network of 24 universities.
- In Delaware, funds provided through the Blue Collar Jobs Act of 1984 are used to pay part of the costs for customized training that is tailored to companies' written specifications. Trainers are paid half before training is provided and half after it has been satisfactorily completed.
- At the Alabama Center for Quality and Productivity, a governor-appointed seven-person board guides curriculum development to ensure that it is responsive to business needs and helps market the program. The center operates on land donated by General Motors and has trained 3,000 GM staff in quality control.

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What Should a Retraining Program Include?

The content of a workplace retraining program depends largely on the specific skill needs of the individual industry or company in which the program participants are employed. Gordus et al. (1987) identified the following program elements, which may be used in different combinations to meet the needs of individual employers and employees:

- A counseling/educational guidance component that provides adults with the information and skills required to develop an action plan for their own career and educational development
- An assessment system (as nonthreatening as possible) that enables educational institutions and employers to determine where training and upgrading are needed
- A support system that provides such elements as tuition assistance, time off from work for learning, a study site within the workplace, child care, and recognition of the program participants' achievements
- A basic skills program (which may require another name so as to avoid any stigma that may be attached to employees' need for remediation)
- A vocational skills program (which should integrate learning with practical application in the workplace to the greatest extent possible)
- A general skills program that includes communication and organizational skills
- Management development programs (p. 50)

Other elements were identified in a study of ways to persuade those in fields of declining opportunities to take advantage of retraining (Miskovic 1987). The study found that workers have a limited perspective of the workplace, do not judge a job on the basis of its potential as a career path, and are adverse to taking risks. Recommendations to overcome these barriers include the following:

- Take the program down to the personal level
- Confront specific problems and concerns
- Ensure a short time frame
- Talk in terms of options and opportunities
- Create a central source of help and information

Features of Successful Retraining Programs

Educational aspects aside, the success or failure of collaborative programs to prevent skill obsolescence can depend on the way in which a partnership is established and the way in which a program is organized. Gordus et al. (1987) listed the following actions as being crucial to the success of retraining partnerships:

- Identification of differences between educational and corporate institutions in terms of their missions, goals, and climate so that respect for differences can be developed and supported
- Identification of mutual goals and objectives
- Clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities
- Multiple contacts among many levels of the organization so that knowledge of each other's plans and problems can be acquired
- Careful communication on both sides, including the development and maintenance of information-sharing procedures
- Flexibility based on trust and knowledge of what can and cannot be accomplished in each organization
- Rapid responses to concerns and complaints from all partners
- Development of a reward and recognition system for learners and for persons working on the programs

Diverse as the many types of retraining program partnerships may be, it is important that they include a mix of general employability and job-specific skills to prepare program participants to adapt to future workplace changes that cannot as yet be predicted with certainty.

REFERENCES

This ***ERIC Digest*** is based upon the following publication:

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